DOC'JMENT RESUME

ED 334 214 TM 016 638

AUTHOR Scheirer, Elinor A.
TITLE The Experience of the Researcher: Qualitative Approaches in Pursuit of a Research Agenda.
PUB DATE 90
NOTE 18p.
PUB TYPE Viewpoints (Opinion/Position Papers, Essays, etc.) (120) -- Reports - Evaluative/Feasibility (142)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS Case Studies; *Experience; *Experimenter Characteristics; *Individual Characteristics; Psychological Characteristics; *Qualitative Research; *Researchers; Research Methodology; Research Problems; *Social Science Research

ABSTRACT

It is argued that careful attention to the role of the researcher's experience in qualitative research is desirable for several reasons. A rationale for such examination is established, and the research and scholarly activity pursued by the author for the last 11 years are described to present a kind of career case study for analysis of the process as it has evolved. The search for the self in research efforts is considered. Personal predispositions are acknowledged as they affect research work. Also acknowledged are the associations among the nature of the researcher, the focus of the research, the process of researching, and results found in the data. Interrelated themes are revealed that are likely to emerge in the experience of other researchers: (1) the significant role of personal predispositions at the beginning of and throughout the entire research process; (2) the apparent flow of inquiry from one stage of research to another; and (3) the deepening of understanding and meaning through reflection and writing. The experience of the researcher must be valued even as it is monitored. (SLD)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

☑ This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

ELINOR A. SCHEIRER

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

ED334214

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE RESEARCHER: QUALITATIVE APPROACHES IN PURSUIT OF A RESEARCH AGENDA

Elinor A. Scheirer
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, Florida
U. S. A.

Abstract

Qualitative research traditions seem to lead frequently to serious consideration of the role of the researcher in the process of inquiry. The self is not only frequently acknowledged here but is also validated and scrutinized in an effort to articulate carefully how perceptions, assumptions, and decisions influence problem selection, research design, and data interpretation. This paper argues first that careful attention to the role of the researcher's experience is desirable for several important reasons. After establishing a rationale for such examination, it describes research and scholarly activity pursued for the last eleven years in order to present a kind of career case study for analysis of the process as it has evolved. The description focuses on personal predispositions as they affect research work and on the associations among the nature of the researcher, the focus of the research, the process of researching, and the results found in the data. The story reveals interrelated themes which likely emerge in the experience of others as they pursue their research interests: the significant role of personal predispositions both at the beginning of one's work and throughout the entire research process; the apparent flow of inquiry from one stage of research to another; the deepening of understanding and meaning through reflection and writing. In exploring these themes, it is hoped that discussion in the field might be further directed in the spirit of valuing the experience of the researcher even while monitoring it to ensure that our efforts have the impact they warrant.

TM016438

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

THE EXPERIENCE OF THE RESEARCHER: QUALITATIVE APPROACHES IN PURSUIT OF A RESEARCH AGENDA

Elinor A. Scheirer
University of North Florida
Jacksonville, Florida
U. S. A.

Qualitative research traditions seem to lead frequently to serious consideration of the role of the researcher in the process of inquiry. The self is not only frequently acknowledged here but is also validated and scrutinized in an effort to articulate carefully how perceptions, assumptions, and decisions influence problem selection, research design, and data interpretation. What researchers experience as the stuff for story-telling over drinks becomes material for analysis into the research process itself and for discussion of epistemological issues.

Indeed the consideration of the self in the research endeavor is not exclusively the domain of qualitative workers. Howe and Eisenhart (1990) describe how all research--qualitative and quantitative--is "inherently theory-laden" (p. 3) and, as such, involves a subjectivity brought to these endeavors by the researchers themselves in terms of the purposes they seek to satisfy and the interpretations they inevitably make. Thus, and quite ironically, is rendered meaningless one focus of the qualitative-quantitative debate in American research circles--whether the researcher is subjective or objective in approaching the research process.

However, to acknowledge that the self of the researcher is involved is not to describe how that self enters into the process. It is not enough, as Peshkin (1988) argues, to confess our subjectivity and cleanse our guilt; rather, we must actively "attend to [our] subjectivity in a meaningful way" (p. 17). Further, even though the quest for one's own subjectivity in particular studies is crucial (Peshkin, 1988), the task presents itself more broadly if one considers how that self variously emerges within the array of research efforts which we may call our research agenda. Sharing and analysis of the experience of individuals doing their research not only adds to our understanding of the process but also might enable us to engage ourselves more deliberately and more knowledgeably in research toward particular ends.

In this paper I will posit first that careful attention to the role of the researcher's experience is desirable for several important reasons. After establishing a rationale for such examination, I will describe research and scholarly activity I have pursued for the last eleven years in order to present a kind of career case study for analysis of the process as it has evolved. This story will reveal interrelated themes which likely emerge in the experience of others as they pursue their research interests. The paper will explore the nature of those themes so that discussion in the field might be further directed in the spirit of valuing the experience of the researcher

even while monitoring it to ensure that our efforts have the impact they warrant.

The Search for the Self in Research Efforts

Much conventional wisdom in research circles has held that good research seeks objectivity over subjectivity, facts rather than values, explanations instead of understandings. This perspective has its origins in the long acceptance in the social sciences of positivism as the embodiment of the scientific method (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). However, the philosophy of science now acknowledges that theory, constructed by human beings, guides all scientific investigations and that such investigations gain their meaning as they meet human purposes. Verificationism as the tenet of positivism is no longer viable since observation cannot be "strictly separated from and remain untainted by the purposes that animate the conduct and evaluation of scientific investigation" (p. 3). We thus find ourselves dealing with a post-positivistic research world. The self of the researcher no longer is an inevitable but worrisome thorn to a study but becomes part and parcel of the effort--guiding it every step of the way.

Such a view might impress the traditionalist as ego-bound. However, beyond the compelling assertion offered above to accept the importance of the researcher's perspective, there seem to be at least two other related reasons to address the role of the self in research efforts.

The first extrapolates from the argument for a post-positivistic research world. Kaplan (1964) distinguishes between two types of logic, reconstructed logic and logic-in-use. In the natural sciences positivism, for example, served as one reconstructed logic, formulated to describe, to explain, and even to govern them, while at the same time practicing scientists employed logic-in-use which largely ignored positivism's tenets (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990). As a result, while the natural sciences have been explained by positivism, the practitioners in sciences have often pursued their work according to their own views of logic-in-use.

Thus, it is possible to argue that when researchers make decisions about their methodology so that it fits their purposes better or responds more effectively to the research context, they are demonstrating logic-in-use which may at times run counter to the requirements of orthodox methodology. The formulation of this logic-in-use is one striking example of the self operating in the research endeavor. Therefore, while discussions of "proper" methodology do abound--in research methods courses, as well as at conferences such as this one--methodological guidelines do not remain fixed. Instead they reflect a "drift," an "evolution of logic in use " (Howe & Eisenhart, 1990, p. 4) related to changes in the nature of theory and practice as wrought by human beings and in light of the human purposes for which research is undertaken.

This is not to say that there are no standards to be followed in carrying out research, that anything goes as long as the researcher can provide some sort of rationalization. Many sins can be, and have been, committed with such a mindset. Rather, the shape of the research in a post-positivistic world can

come forth in such form that it can adhere to solid standards without succumbing to a tyranny of outmoded philosophical views. Even while Kaplan (1964) declares that "the pursuit of truth is accountable to nothing and to no one not a part of that pursuit itself" (p. 3), that pursuit <u>is</u> accountable and, further, researchers are accountable within the context of "standards of professional competence to which [they] are subject" (p. 4). However, the "standards governing the conduct of inquiry in any of its phases emerge from inquiry and are themselves subject to further inquiry" (p. 5).

Thus, standards are not rigid and fixed but fluid and evolving, though within a framework which protects the inquiry from encroachment by charlatans or social enterprises outside the arena of science. As one powerful example of such a framework, Howe and Eisenhart (1990) suggest five general standards to guide both qualitative and quantitative research which recognize a post-positivist epistemological perspective and yet insure that the conduct of the inquiry can be relied upon and that conclusions so derived warrant careful consideration. While these standards clearly place the researcher at the center of the decision-making process governing research design, implementation, analysis, and interpretation, they provide the criteria by which such decisions must be evaluated: fit between research questions and research techniques, effective use of research techniques, coherence of research questions with background assumptions, overall warrant of conclusions, and recognition of internal and external value constraints. The logic-in-use in such inquiry must thereby prove itself through the success of the inquiry (Kaplan, 1964), with the researcher as the architect of such proof.

Therefore, since decision-making remains at the core of the methodology followed by the researcher, attention to that researcher as human decision-maker can enlighten our understanding of the choice and character of particular methodologies followed. Attention to the self of the researcher does not thereby end with the ego but places the research endeavor in the brighter light necessary for close scrutiny.

Mooney's (1975) classic piece first published in 1957 offers yet another line of thinking which justifies the need to address the concerns of "the researcher himself." The popular view of research, as Mooney describes it, is that fashioned by the consumer who sees the products of research but who does not witness the process experienced by the researcher. Such a view creates a mythology about research which at the least erects walls between producer and consumer to muddle communication and at worst can disable those who may be embarking on their first research adventure. This view is particularly troublesome at a time when the field of education is calling for increased collaboration between "researchers" and "practitioners" and for more attention to the potential offered by "action research" in schools.

If we are to bridge that unfortunate gap erected between the consumers and the producers of research, we must then examine the inner experience of the researcher and make it public and, hence, more accessible to all who may be interested in participating in the process. Research might then be seen as a personal, energizing endeavor with both social and more personal benefits. It is only through such meaningful access by as many concerned professionals

as possible that research might address the immense challenges faced by schools and the teachers within them. These professionals must see research as "freedom-giving, personally and scientifically rewarding, vigorous and progressively penetrating" (Mooney, 1975, p. 187); they must believe that it is

> possible to integrate the pursuit of science and research with the acceptance and fruitful development of one's self. The two, science and self, can be one integrative action and, indeed, need to be one integrative action if either is to be productive and grow. (Mooney, 1975, pp. 187-188)

A first step toward establishing this access and integration is for researchers to share their research stories in order not to gain ego-gratification but to demystify the process and thereby establish it as a most human enterprise available to any who choose to pursue it and worthy of the effort necessary to become seriously involved.

The self of the researcher then becomes, if not the central concern, a central concern in both understanding and directing all research efforts. By examining how the self operates during the entire research process, we not only accept its inevitable role, but we also can monitor how it functions and can entice and engage others in this most challenging of endeavors.

Life Stories in a Research Agenda

I start my discussion of my research and scholarly efforts with a basic assumption: that the research process begins with the formulation of research questions which in turn drive all other decisions about the research process. Such an approach is not always the case, as many who have worked with graduate students can attest; very often students select questions based more on what method can be used or what method can be avoided rather than on formulating the questions first and then selecting a method as a result of analyzing the questions carefully and from many vantage points. While my questions have often been only gnawing concerns, vague curiosities, or undefined dissatisfactions with what I am experiencing either in overt actions or in thought, I recognize with Mooney (1975) "the fundamental and initiating status of the self in research production" (p. 190). Personal meaning therefore becomes the starting point for all effort.

Spindler (1982), too, recognizes how at this first level the self becomes intertwined with the research. In introducing Peshkin's (1982) account of his own work, Spindler notes the importance of "nonrational personal predispositions" (p. 49) in the choice of research problems, methods, and field sites. I shall use Spindler's predispositions as the first focus of my narrative here. Peshkin's own narrative uses a structure which acknowledges the "close association . . . among the four Rs of research" (p. 50)--the nature of the researcher, the focus of the research, the process of researching, and the results found in the data, with the researcher playing perhaps the most significant role in creating this association. In an effort to emphasize the linkages among these four Rs in my own experiences, I shall adopt a language similar to Peshkin's for description.

My own predispositions regarding research arise from several strands of experience. I freely describe myself as a "child of the sixties," having come of age during the optimism, enthusiasm, and commitment of the Kennedy years and maturing while a domestic "war on poverty" was being fought at the same time that a war was being fought in Vietnam. The social reform efforts captured my social conscience, and I chose to prepare to teach as a way of bettering society through the improvement of the education offered by the public schools.

My own school experience had been largely supportive since early on I was seen as a high-achiever. Yet, even as a child, I was vaguely disturbed by my own observations and experiences. Seeing a fellow classmate physically punished in primary school raised many questions. Being confused about why "'x' times 'x' equals 'x'-squared" and being told "that it just is, so accept it" made me doubt my own understanding and whether making sense of the world was what school was about. However, as a lower-middle-class child of an intellectual widow, I continued to study hard and to perform well so that I could be more competitive in seeking a scholarship for college. During one of my high-school summers, I received a scholarship to attend a well-known private New England "prep" school where it seemed all my questions were legitimate and divergent ways of attacking assignments were rewarded. This reinforcement challenged me to continue questioning and struggling to make sense of my school world.

In college there was similar support and challenge, coupled with the deliberate exposure to many of the arts and sciences demanded by a liberal arts curriculum. I attribute much to political science courses where I learned to explore initial assumptions and values, to examine data from many sources, to see their consequences in human action, and to question the declarations from authorities. Not surprisingly, I began to oppose the Vietnam War while not losing my idealism. Improving American education seemed the best way to right social injustice and to prevent another Vietnam.

After a short period teaching, I entered graduate school to study curriculum. A fortunate reading of a "curriculum" book during my undergraduate teacher preparation courses suggested to me that something intriguing was part of the "curriculum perspective." I found that the topics discussed in curriculum related to my own concern with asking basic questions about what purposes education was to serve, in whose interests, and with what personal, social, and political consequences. Curriculum study offered me the opportunity and language for the analysis of the "big picture" which I thought would establish the necessary base for efforts to bring about social improvement through education.

In spite of the deliberateness with which I sought out the study of curriculum, graduate school also changed the character of my own educational experience. Even though academic success in terms of external recognition had become familiar to me and even though I felt supported in my earlier intellectual questioning, I had not often felt deep personal meaning growing out of my efforts. In the graduate experience, however, meaning-making became the focus of all intellectual endeavor. It energized me in ways I had never

before experienced so that I read widely with interest and sought enlightenment in areas where I had previously hesitated to enter. It made me self-confident in my own questioning so that I came to trust my own version of the process of inquiry which questioning initiated. It promoted a self-awareness that permitted me to become vulnerable to the unknown, to acquire new languages and to learn new skills, and then to shape them to my own purposes. I often describe this period as my intellectual liberation.

Ironically, even though I felt in control of my own inquiry and energized by the intellectual possibilities lying "out there," I was not able to shape my evolving fascination with the American open education movement into a focused dissertation topic. I suspect that I needed both more time and, perhaps, the opportunity of observing its practice, struggle, and eventual demise in the next four years or so in order to find a place from which to ask the questions important to me. Indeed, during my first years in the professorate, I was able to work with an "open" elementary school in suburban New York City, with an "individualized" elementary program in the New York City School System itself, and informally with a "free school" in Manhattan. These experiences were enriched by my involvement with an "open" elementary school in Florida.

Then, as the back-to-basics and accountability movements surfaced in the mid-1970s, I listened as professionals shared their frustrations in trying to teach according to the recommendations of open educators while responding to the concerns of parents, politicians, and community members that children were not adequately acquiring the basics of schooling. Simultaneously I watched the arenas of professional decision-making become narrowed by legislative mandates regarding objectives and testing procedures and by local school-district efforts to spell out instruction through detailed curriculum guides and the adoption of textbook series complete with teachers' guides, student workbooks, and supporting audio-visual materials.

At conferences during this time, I was being encouraged by my former mentors to focus my scholarly activity, to "find a horse and ride it." But I wasn't sure where the horse was, what kind it was, what color it was, or even whether one really existed for me. As it happened, these early experiences created the set of predispositions which I brought to my first major research effort which has come to define my professional research agenda.

In the late 1970s I decided to apply for sabbatical leave from my university at the first opportunity in my career. Fortunately, I was not required to submit a formal study plan; I needed only to state in most general terms what my efforts would entail. Here personal associations merged with earlier interests to establish a starting point. A close colleague offered me her contacts in English schools located in the old West Riding of Yorkshire, in Bristol, and in London; with that suggestion, a previous desire to study in Europe, which I had nurtured for a brief summer following college graduation, came to life once more. My abiding, romantic interest in informal, open, progressive education surfaced, too, since these schools had reputations for exemplifying the kind of education which had initially inspired American open educators in the late 1960s and early 1970s. Further, I was intrigued that

these schools continued to practice such approaches even as Americans were dismissing them as "not having worked."

I therefore planned a year-long sabbatical that was open-ended, with only the first weeks defined in terms of school observations in Yorkshire. I implicitly trusted in the experience of these first weeks to suggest future directions. Indeed it was not at all clear whether any formal research activity would appropriately emerge or whether I would instead structure further work for myself in terms of more traditional advanced professional study.

The early observations in about a dozen schools led to a felt need to spend some time in one school and then in one classroom. I therefore spent approximately seven weeks observing and participating in one class of seven-year-olds in a "first school" located in a mining community. During these weeks I recalled observation-participation studies I had found exciting during my graduate work and early in my professional career. I also knew that my friendly and receptive first-year teacher-host was vaguely uncomfortable with the ongoing and somewhat mysterious presence of an American university professor in her classroom. However, the remembrance of a chance brief meeting over coffee with the staff of a middle school kept suggesting to me that there might be dynamic observation-participation opportunities in that setting.

I finally scheduled a day's observation in Rosedale Middle School. After a few hours, I found myself asking if I could extend my involvement over the remainder of the week and even through the weekend's trip to the Yorkshire Dales with a group of "third-year" children. A relationship had quickly solidified, and I proceeded to establish the boundaries of what might be possible to study in this school. After conversations with the head who consulted with the staff, my time at Rosedale was soon extended to as long as I wished to stay. I was invited to observe in whatever areas of the school interested me and in whatever patterns I found appropriate to both meet my needs while honoring the educational needs of the children. With such broad access available and on the basis of my earlier observation-participation experiences, I began to shape a research study to determine how this school culture functioned.

I later came to describe the study as ethnographic, though I hesitated then, as I do now, in confidently attaching such a label to my efforts there. However, regardless of the label by which to define the study's overall methodology, I do believe that my procedures reflected certain important characteristics. The procedures responded to general research questions which focused on a need to describe and understand how a particular group of teachers and children functioned in a particular school culture. These research questions also seemed to address the needs of the field at that time, that is, to describe the nature of informal, open, progressive primary education in practice so that some definitional clarity could be brought to discussion of its efficacy. The procedures I used followed recommendations from the then-current educational literature regarding appropriate methods and techniques to use in observation and participation work. They also acknowledged the primacy in all situations of the children's education, as

defined by the professionals in the school. And they attended to the personal and professional complexities of having a researcher from one country study and live with colleagues in another country, with all the implications for professional relationships which can arise from such a situation.

The head functioned as both my chief informant and as benevolent gatekeeper to the arena for study. Since he was the person responsible for the smooth functioning of the school, I sought his support and confirmation that avenues I selected for study would not raise unforeseen problems legally, professionally, or culturally. The other staff members, too, became informants in the research process so that all freely offered me their perspective and advice as I participated and observed in school life, recorded events as they occurred, and studied school documents. Of course, some were more eagerly involved, but all contributed to shape the focus of the study, to provide access and support, to offer feedback and share confidences about my activities, and to respond to my direct questions.

The personal dimensions of my involvement with the staff naturally became significant, an aspect of my subjectivity which inextricably connected my research interests to personal enjoyment in receiving positive responses and helpful suggestions; all of the feedback added much meaning to my life a long way from home. In some ways I psychologically "went native," though behaviorally I held back. I became convinced of how much this approach to schooling made sense. However, I was most careful not to presume more familiarity than I felt confident in having nor to intrude into relationships which seemed just outside my sphere of understanding.

My subjectivity emerges here in many ways. It is clear that this six-month experience at Rosedale wove self and subject together. Intuition or, more blatantly, an attraction to the staff over coffee led me to Rosedale; and my own excitement at their responsiveness encouraged me to select this school as the site for a formal study. Many of my predispositions paved the path to Rosedale. I also implicitly felt that Rosedale had much potential for providing me with "good" data, useful in my work and illuminating in response to my general questions about the characteristics of informal, open, progressive primary education, the nature of the curriculum organization, and the type of teaching styles evident. This feeling arose because I initially trusted my colleagues who successively directed me to Rosedale; I believed they had the information necessary for identifying appropriate sites and would use it carefully in helping me out. But I ultimately decided that researcher and research focus would meet at Rosedale.

The role of the self in artistically shaping the questions and defining the methods for researching becomes more difficult to monitor than how initial contacts are made. My own comfort with the open-ended, with raising questions as often as answering them, and with looking at relationships within a "big picture" as they reflect fundamental educational concerns led me to ethnographic procedures. There seemed a "fit" between how I think and how ethnography often works. The kind of questions I was asking also led to ethnography because of their focus on understanding relationships within a particular culture. Therefore, thought processes, questions raised, preferred

ways of working, and methodology came together and I proceeded carefully to pursue study.

Aside from suggesting an overall approach, ethnography does not tell us what to do specifically. As Mooney (1975) discussed research, "one has to feel his way along and trust his feeling to guide him into moves that only later can be given a logical maplike form" (p. 194). Not unlike other researchers who have talked of muddling, messing about, and following hunches, I too was left with the task of inventing my procedures within the framework of an overall methodology.

Fortunately, the ethnographic framework deeply respected the people with whom I worked--the children and staff of Rosedale. This non-intrusiveness fit my preferences for relating to others and my beliefs about how educational research should both honor and derive from a primary concern for children's learning and then inform efforts to help them better learn. Because both specific foci and research techniques were discussed with the staff as the study unfolded, the process was reflective of not only my decisions but also the suggestions of others. I, of course, encouraged this involvement and chose how much of it to let into the process. The study was mine, but the process of researching seemed more broadly shared.

The results found in these ethnographic data inevitably reveal my own subjectivity. The interpretations made did not simply emerge full-grown from field notes, documents, and tapes. I imposed shape on the data, attempted explanations which I discarded or developed as they seemed to fit the material at hand.

A few initial interpretations were sensed early in the ethnographic experience so that subsequent data collection also became a means to either confirm or recast them. For example, from the beginning of my stay at Rosedale I focused on the organization of the school day which seemed to play a significant role in supporting the achievement of many curriculum goals. The ritual of events comprised an obvious pattern which not only structured school experience but also reflected rational decision-making by the staff in order to accomplish particular purposes. There were extended periods of time for intensive investigative or expressive work by the children individually or in small groups, balanced by times when the class or the whole school came together to discuss procedures, to share an experience, or to celebrate. This pattern of the school day not only was easy to observe; it also provided one clear way to organize the very collection of the data--by their association with particular predictable events. But beyond this, an obvious observable pattern in school life at Rosedale also became a structure which could assist in interpreting that life.

However, most of the time the origin of these interpretations lay in the identification of themes which repeatedly occurred as key words or underlying constructs in the field notes, interview transcripts, and school documents. But no matter what technique of data analysis had been used, the themes or factors offered as organizing schemes to describe and explain them are the outgrowths of information-processing by the researcher. As such, they are products of the researcher as much as of the data. From Mooney's (1975)

perspective, the research and the self become "one integrative action" (p. 188). As I collected, analyzed, and interpreted the Rosedale data, I was creating constructions from within my own experience. Their roots are likely impossible to determine fully, though predispositions in the form of earlier personal experiences, specific educational training, favored ideas, articulated and unexamined values, and so on played as significant a role as the events in the school itself. Much like Peshkin (1982), I put together an interpretation of the data I collected which made sense to me and which I then hoped would be interesting to other educators (Scheirer, 1983).

What seems most relevant to the inevitable concern as to whether or not these interpretations or conclusions are warranted is whether someone else could also have seen the same connections as I saw. Would another researcher situated as I was also be able to "see" as I did (Kaplan, 1964)? If so, then my data, my themes, and their meaning in the Rosedale setting are verifiable because they are "intersubjective" (p. 128). As Peshkin (1982) admits with regard to his own work, I too acknowledge that these data and results are very likely not the only accounts which could be made out of research study at Rosedale, but they are legitimate and worthy of consideration because others could agree that they indeed existed.

I did share the drafts of my writing with the Rosedale staff in order to seek verification from them. I wondered if, as residents of the school, they could see what I saw if I shared with them the processes I followed. Their reactions confirmed both my collection of data and the interpretations drawn from them. In addition, continued reading in the literature related to informal, open, or progressive primary education confirmed the relevance of the constructs I believed to be important at Rosedale.

My own self-awareness, however, led me to revisit Rosedale for two weeks about six months after I had left. I was concerned that my own immersion in the environment may have led me to see that which a more distant perspective might not see. My worry was that I had "gone native" to the extent that I was reading into a situation that which was not there. Therefore, I re-entered the school after a significant time away during which I had returned to my normal professional life which involved very few activities at all related to Rosedale. I wanted this fresh perspective either to confirm and extend my data and my processes of interpretation or to warn me that I had succumbed to a set of experiences which had been exciting but which were outside the realm of what I considered research.

In a sense, this phase of my work was self-verification. Though not deliberately intended as such, it could also be a type of triangulation, manipulated by altering my perceptual set as a professional as much as possible. I re-entered Rosedale rather briefly from a professional role which was sufficiently different from the one I had assumed during my sabbatical. The experiences I had at the school were similar to those I had had during my initial stay, and, hence, the data I collected on this visit were similar. It seemed as though I had been "on track" during my study; further, now I had additional material to exemplify how the people at Rosedale lived. While it is possible that I merely "went native" again quite quickly, I had no feeling

of deliberately facilitating that process nor of discounting contradictory ideas.

Repeatedly over the years I have returned to Rosedale for a week or two weeks at a time. These visits have provided data of school life in a kind of snapshot form. While the data and their interpretations have indeed provided additional matter for understanding informal, open, or progressive education, they also have enabled informal analysis of the evolution of a school's curriculum in response to staff changes, developments in the field of education, and political and community influences. My purposes, though, were not to collect such data systematically in order to answer questions about educational change in one school, but to ground my teaching and scholarship in school practices I considered important in my professional life. I needed Rosedale as an anchor as I explored related issues in my work.

Beginning about four years after my initial study at Rosedale, I began discussions with the head about our writing a text which would describe the nature of their curriculum--not as unique among primary schools but as representative of schools which adopted a particular set of beliefs about children, education, and the learning process. I felt that this description needed exposure in the literature since very little was available in the United States to suggest that such curricula were of any current interest. Further, the very familiarity of such school practices in England tended to make them seen as givens rather than as founded on clear principles, subject to careful decision-making, and evolving as the result of disciplined reflection on such practices. The self emerges here in my research or scholarly agenda with the strong beliefs in what schooling should entail, what forms facilitate it, and what means seem suitable in bringing about such a curriculum in schools.

While the writing of the book with my colleague (Hunter & Scheirer, 1988) was not a research activity in the traditional sense of that term, the process I brought to it was grounded in my research at Rosedale. Indeed, what I learned from writing it I then took back to my earlier research experience, both to confirm what I was writing and to uncover new avenues for further work.

Our research agendas, therefore, do not strike me as discrete studies which emerge neatly and in succession. They comprise studies and various forms of analyses--both those which are more research-oriented and those related more clearly to theory development--which offer answers to certain questions, pose further questions, and collectively further clarify the broad field of study. Even though these activities occur at particular points in our professional lives, they also cause us to reconsider our earlier work and influence the direction of our future work. They are intertwined and thereby illustrate how complex the creative process is in our professional lives.

Two other foci of my work deserve mention in this account. Repeatedly as I unraveled themes which described aspects of life at Rosedale, I came to realize that the constructs themselves deserved analysis. I have struggled with exploring the nature of child-centeredness, integration in the curriculum, and facilitative teaching. While data have comprised the

principal bases for the analyses, there have also been sojourns into literature at times distant from my original concerns. For example, when the notion of collaborative research seemed to explain much of what I did at Rosedale, I felt a need to then examine what that idea could mean in the context of ethnography (Scheirer, 1986b). Later, after hearing the word "collaboration" used extensively in educational journals and conferences over a period of a few months, I felt a need to explore in greater depth what might be necessary for research activities to be classed appropriately as collaborative (Scheirer, 1986a). These needs of course arose from both a desire to explain my own research experiences and an awareness of my own confusion about what such collaboration might legitimately include. Again, my efforts here are not research in and of themselves in the traditional sense, but they reflect how the desire to make sense of our experiences leads us into varied forms of inquiry. It seems inconsequential whether or not the work is labeled research if it sheds light on what we are doing in our professional lives.

Recently I have developed a research interest which seems rather discrete. I have been interviewing teachers who have taught in informal, open, progressive primary schools in England about their professional careers and how they characterize the development of their own teaching styles. However, because my interest in these personal histories arises from previous work, this effort cannot be seen as one coolly selected from those which "the field" needs to have addressed. Even though the study has undoubtedly been influenced by current discussion in the literature of teachers' lives and careers, my own professional identity as a teacher educator who also wishes graduates to teach in a certain way has led me to the topic more than anything. Once again, then, my own subjectivity is evident, and the interrelationships among research and scholarly efforts are underscored.

Themes in the Research Experience

I see at least three themes emerging from this account of my research and scholarly efforts. In describing them, I hope to initiate dialogue with others so that in recognizing the role of the researcher's experience in our work, we might both monitor it and value it.

First, it seems apparent that personal predispositions occur not just at the beginning of a study or at the launching of one's lifetime research agenda, but throughout all of the experiences in the entire research process. Research questions emerge from these predispositions not only in terms of their focus or content but also in terms of their type. There are many reasons in my story why I should be committed to the study of informal, open, progressive education. There are also reasons why as researchers and scholars we might ask descriptive questions rather than cause-effect ones, open-ended questions as opposed to convergent ones, or questions which seek understanding and meaning more than ones which require specific responses without conscious connection to context.

Preferred ways of pursuing answers to questions also reflect our predispositions. We seem to gravitate toward research approaches and specific techniques as much from personal taste as from the needs of the research

questions. Of course, congruence with the questions is not thereby threatened since we have also been the architects of those questions.

As we pursue varied studies within our professional careers, it is more difficult to chart the relationship between our predispositions and the shape of those studies. Our previous work does significantly influence what direction we take; however, this work already carries the stamp of our predispositions. Further, we also may find ourselves at certain points finally focusing on a topic in which we had been interested for some time. We may likewise finally use methodologies whose potential for informing our inquiry we suspected much earlier. Thus, the personal predispositions regarding our work and the direction the work takes as it evolves become increasingly intertwined so that as we continue to develop our research, their relationship becomes more intimate. It becomes impossible to separate the strands for explanation. We increasingly own our own work.

Secondly, both in process and on reflection, there seems to be a flow of inquiry from one stage of research to another--a kind of unfolding of direction from within the area of inquiry itself. As we have already seen, that flow is surely under our own control for we select from among the many ways inquiry could develop. Yet other professionals are hopefully able to say, "Of course, this is a sensible direction to pursue." A kind of logic seems present which, by Kaplan's (1964) terms, could be labeled intersubjective.

Serendipity also plays a significant role in directing the inquiry to paths unforeseen. For example, I have often wondered how I was fortunate enough to end up at Rosedale Middle School when I did not consciously select it for study at the outset of my sabbatical. The successive events which led me there were serendipitous as much as they are explainable in retrospect.

The flow of inquiry as it involves site selection, choice of research approaches, and structuring of techniques may also be explained by Kaplan's (1964) notion of logic-in-use. The researcher <u>in situ</u> is primed to look for all kinds of emerging possibilities, takes advantage of what might be useful, pursues hunches, and experiments with techniques--some of which are discarded and others which are more fully developed. Further, as Kaplan argues, since there are no fixed boundaries between disciplines in a dynamic approach to research, the researcher may adopt techniques, models, explanations, theories from any area"--in short, whatever [he or she] finds useful in [his or her] own inquiries" (p. 4). The flow of inquiry need not therefore be artificially restricted; indeed we can both trust and nurture it as revealing a logic that can inform our research questions.

Finally, the experience of the researcher involves the "deepening of understanding and meaning" through reflection and writing. The research self is not merely evident in the decisions associated with overt research activity regarding design and data collection. While the self of the researcher <u>in situ</u> is a powerful force, especially in qualitative studies where the self is often described as a primary research tool, that self emerges most powerfully <u>in reflection</u> on the active part of the research experience. As we write about the research process and the data we collect, we shed the blinders of

activity for the relative clarity of reflection during which the self more potently emerges.

Recent research and theory on the writing process reveal its complexity, its recursive nature, its intimacy with the self, and its unyielding demands upon our very humanness. When we write up what we have experienced in a research study, we are not just reporting events but reliving them and constructing meaning around them. Peshkin (1982) refers to what he calls the reconstruction of results which occurs during the retrospective writing process. However, the writing process is also taking place even before the writing is actually done (Peshkin, 1982). It seems, on reflection, that the overt research activity is the stage on which the writing is planned, even though at the time it is the activity which is the center of attention.

In addition, the writing process takes place not only in reference to the one study we may be focusing on at a particular time. Reflection, reconstruction, and meaning-making tie in with the distant past as well as with the immediate past. As we focus on writing about a current research experience, we also revisit our earlier experiences which can change their meaning for us because of an increased awareness and appreciation of self as it has developed throughout years of continuing work which has led us down several paths. It is also likely that this temporal quality flows to the future, and we begin in the writing to see where our next efforts in our life stories are likely to take us. Thus, the recursive nature of the writing process itself, beginning within the boundaries of the immediate focus, lead also to a recursiveness writ large as we seek to make meaning of our research lives.

The nature of the self's involvement is not clear as this reflection, reconstruction, and meaning-making unfold through writing. Even as we place structure on what we intend to describe and explain, the writing process also seems to take on a life of its own. Such has been the case with this paper whose abstract I submitted several months ago but whose current version seems in many ways quite different from what was originally planned. The writing process itself seems to have led me down paths I had not even dimly viewed before--or so I believe--but paths which became important to me and which have helped me clarify where I have been in my work and perhaps where I am going.

I alternately stand in awe of the process and feel frustrated with my seeming lack of control over it. Perhaps the greatest difficulty for us as humans is to come face to face with our own humanity and find it far too complex for our own understanding. The ironies overwhelm. But we continue to reflect, to write, to attempt meaning, and to study the nature of the writing process.

What does become clearer is that as one pursues research questions, reflects on them, and struggles toward meaning through writing one becomes closer to that which is studied, or as Mooney (1975) might put it, more connected with that which is studied within the universe. One understands it more deeply and becomes energized by that understanding. Previous understandings are seen as just that--stepping stones in the continual discovery of that which lies within us, as individuals or collectively. We

make that understanding our own, even as we know that that understanding is incomplete.

A simple example from recent American history can show us how understandings once dearly held now seem decisively superseded by current understandings. In the 1960s, President Lyndon Johnson declared a "war on poverty" in the United States. Many educators participated in that war because they believed that the main ingredient necessary to win that war was conviction, accompanied by political, legal, and fiscal support. They believed we could then launch the research which would give us the strategies we needed to extricate poverty from our "great society." Twenty-five years later, this set of understandings seem naive and woefully simplistic. Though the importance of conviction has not been denied in the solution of grave social and educational problems, the factors contributing to those problems seem incredibly more complex so that recent research on "effective" schools, for instance, merely recognizes that certain school characteristics seem to co-exist within these environments with no causal relationships suggested. Further, some circles even acknowledge that we might not be looking at the most important characteristics of effective schools. Such a development in thinking reflects a deepening of understanding wrought by much research effort and reflection upon that effort.

The deepening of understanding, then, becomes the justification for our research efforts. And, as we endeavor to own that understanding for ourselves and to conduct research which has meaning for ourselves, we acknowledge the central role of the self. Our life stories show how the experience of the researcher and the meaning the researcher brings to that experience run throughout the research process and become its raison d'etre. By our recognizing this reality, monitoring it, and even honoring it,

> . . . . . research
> then becomes a way
> of generating life
> and sharing of its nutriment,
> serving, then,
> the primal aim
> of education
> in the affairs of men,
> i.e., sharing life-in-mind
> as means to life in men.
>
> No longer lost,
> a new reality is gained;
> the problem's set,
> solutions have their relevance;
> research comes to life again.
>
> (Mooney, 1975, p. 174)

REFERENCES

Howe, K., & Eisenhart, M. (1990). Standards for qualitative (and quantitative) research: A prolegomenon. Educational Researcher, 19(4), 2-9.

Hunter, R., & Scheirer, E. A. (1988). The organic curriculum: Organizing for learning, 7-12. Lewes, England: Falmer.

Kaplan, A. (1964). The conduct of inquiry: Methodology for behavioral science. San Francisco: Chandler.

Mooney, R. L. (1975). The researcher himself. In W. Pinar (Ed.), Curriculum theorizing: The reconceptualists (pp. 173-207). Berkeley, CA: McCutchan.

Peshkin, A. (1982). The researcher and subjectivity: Reflections on an ethnography of school and community. In G. Spindler (Ed.), Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in action. New York: CBS.

Peshkin, A. (1988). In search of subjectivity--One's own. Educational Researcher, 17(7), 17-21.

Scheirer, E. A. (1983, April). Ethnography, comparative education, and the classroom: Some lessons from English informal education. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, Montreal, Canada.

Scheirer, E. A. (1986a, October). In search of collaboration in education. Paper presented at The Bergamo Curriculum Theory Conference, Dayton, OH.

Scheirer, E. A. (1986b, April). A model for collaborative ethnography in schools from an international perspective. Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association, San Francisco. (ERIC Document Reproduction Service No. ED 272 413)

Spindler, G. (Ed.). (1982). Doing the ethnography of schooling: Educational anthropology in action. New York: CBS.